



# TELEISE LĒSA

>>>> Interview via email between **Teleise** x **Lisa**

'I grew up understanding the Samoan language and living our everyday Samoan rituals: the big Samoan feasts, the large family gatherings that came with the big feasts, the hierarchical system of doing the chores as a girl, and the way we used to *sulu our ie lavalava* (tie our everyday sarongs) to carry out our many *fe'au* (chores). That was everyday life. But there was a real disconnect between who I was as a New Zealand born Samoan and who I was as an artist.'

New Zealand born Samoan artist and designer Teleise Lēsa grew up in West Auckland. Her artwork explores identity as a Samoan woman living in the diaspora. When Teleise finished high school, she applied to study at Elam School of Fine Arts in Auckland. She thought that getting a degree in art would help her understand who she was as an artist. Despite her obvious talent, she did not make it past the initial interview - but she has proved that you do not need to go to art school to be a "successful" artist.

'Back in the 90s, an island girl applying for such a prestigious university was almost unheard of. The encouragement from my teachers was amazing, so I applied. I got an interview and apparently it was a big deal to get to that stage.'

She reminisces,

'The interview was in a 3x3 cubicle that had a mini-gallery of the work I'd put forward in my application. Four lecturers stood there, whilst I talked about my work. I froze, muttered a few words, and I lost them within the first 5 seconds. That has stuck with me to this day.'

Teleise spent the next years of her life refining her skills as a painter and designer. In 2015, she moved to Brisbane and set up an online business called Uniquely Pacific, selling paintings, prints and more recently accessories and handmade candles. She has sold work as far as Russia and Japan. Over the years, Teleise has sustained an online business that has provided for her family even during the pandemic.

She shares,

'No matter how "successful" Uniquely Pacific became - and I use that word loosely - the underlying reality was that I still didn't know my own story or what I wanted my work to reflect.'

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Teleise Lēsa (2019) detail of *Complementary*, acrylic paint on canvas, wool

Photo : Serge Ah-Wong



In 2019, Teleise created and painted an intricate wall tapestry inspired by the Samoan *fala lili'i* (handwoven mat with decorative edges). She handsewed the edging with wool as a nod to contemporary *fala* that many Samoans use in their daily lives. The vibrant artwork was exhibited at Ctrl+Alt+Del 2019.

**'I had this narrative building in my head, claiming that the work will speak for itself,'** Teleise shares.

When Teleise's parents migrated from Samoa to New Zealand in the 1970s, they brought with them beautiful and interesting handmade cultural items that adorned their home. This included the *Ula Fala*. Teleise explains that an *Ula Fala* is a necklace traditionally worn by Samoan high chiefs. The ceremonial necklace is made from the pandanus fruit and can be varnished clear or painted red. In Samoan culture, the colour red is associated with high ranking.

**'I grew up seeing how my mum would take pride in displaying *Ula Fala* around our home. *Ula Fala* were draped around photo frames hanging on the walls of our living room.'**

As a way of paying homage to her heritage, Teleise created the striking sculptural piece named *ULA FALA*.

Traditionally, the *Ula Fala* acted as a marker of status. Nowadays, *Ula Fala* are worn by Samoans in the diaspora to display their cultural pride. Even as a first-generation New Zealand born Samoan living in West Auckland, Teleise knew the importance of the *Ula Fala*.



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Photos : Courtesy of exhibition organisers

And the work did speak - *loudly*. We saw hundreds of people gravitate to her artwork, but Teleise still questioned the personal meaning behind her art and her own story.

**'I've turned down interviews and podcasts because of the crippling thoughts I have around: *Who am I?* For years I've been disconnected for the lack of not knowing where my roots were formed.'**

It has taken decades for Teleise to feel confident in her own practice as an artist and identity as a Samoan woman living away from her ancestral island home. Her recent work *ULA FALA* captures the Samoan artist's story powerfully.

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Teleise Lēsa (2021) *Ula Fala*, sculptured polystyrene

Photo : Kyle Weise







'This artwork depicts what the *Ula Fala* looked like through the eyes of eight year old Teleise when looking up to the *Ula Fala* hanging in our West Auckland home. The ginormous size of the *ULA FALA* invokes a sense of pride that I have to be Samoan.'

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Teleise's daughter Shia Lēsa

Photo : Vasa Lēsa

'My art is an extension of my ancestors: the symbols and motifs are the silent whispers of their hearts and minds that echo through the strokes of my brush. The story is simple - continue the journey, so you may also hear the whispers of yesteryear, that we may never be forgotten.'

Teleise Lēsa

1978, Samoa (Fogapoa, Tuasivi, Sale'imoa, Sapapali'i, Fatausi, Matāutu Tai)

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Tapenaga Polataivao-Reupena doing an acknowledgement of country in Samoan

Photo : Jori Etuale